

# 6

## Material Patterns and Colonial Religious Change

The places and objects discussed in the preceding chapters reflect a material process by which Christianity became Melanesian in the first nine decades of missionary endeavours on Tanna and Erromango. Inverting the narrative of native conversion and culture change typical of missionary accounts, I read these materials as showing the ways that Christianity was integrated into indigenous *kastom* in the New Hebrides. This is not a simple matter of 'revisionist' history, but the result of a critical reading of material facts in the form of archaeological data from Melanesian landscapes, limited stratigraphic excavations across a range of sites, and artefacts recovered both in the field and in museum contexts. It is about using archaeological data to replace colonial myths with a more realistic portrayal of Oceanic cross-cultural encounters (see also Flexner 2014a: 76).

The story is about Melanesians, and about new kinds of social and material networks that emerged out of relationships with European missionaries. Missionaries had their own identities and ambitions in regard to these encounters, which were almost always undermined in some way by the local context. In one sense, the mission was a success. As mentioned before, Vanuatu is a largely Christian country, in which the Presbyterian Church remains one of the central institutions (Flexner and Spriggs 2015: 187). The form of Melanesian Christianity in Vanuatu, on the other hand, emerges from a historical context in which local people resisted and transformed the foreign religion into something that could fit into existing, and adaptable, forms relating to *kastom*. Missionaries also had to compromise and adapt to the local situation. Transformations of missionary habits reflect the realities of geographic remoteness from Europe, living in a tropical environment, and finding a way in the Melanesian social world in which they settled.

Throughout the process of religious change in colonial Tanna and Erromango, there was conflict, and there was violence on both sides. Missionaries could be killed or driven away, especially early on, as happened repeatedly on Erromango (Gordon, ed. 1863; Robertson 1902) and Tanna (Adams 1984; Patterson 1864; Turner 1861). Missionaries used their foreign connections to carry out military action against intransigent islanders, as happened with the *Curaçoa* affair (Adams 1984: 150–167). Later missionaries on Tanna, overconfident in their successes, tried to violently repress *kastom*, a move that only succeeded in further entrenching Melanesian beliefs and practices (Bonnemaison 1994: 201–256).

Tanna's Christian kingdom collapsed in one blow, without the use of violence or any subversive plan. The new John Frum myth and the power of dreams were enough to shatter it. Nearly all Presbyterian model villages – carefully laid out around a central lawn where church, school, and bell were in proximity – became empty (Bonnemaison 1994: 226; see also Guiart 1956: 163).

Yet in their own ways, many people came back to the church on Tanna. On the island, Sundays (and for Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons, Saturdays) are days of worship in many villages. Hymns are sung, scripture read, and sermons given. But as the sun begins to set, men still

retire to the *imwarim* to listen to the kava. The *toka* dance still records the year's events and prepares for the next year. Magic stones still make the yams grow, even in ostensibly Christian villages. While 20th-century resistance was less dramatic on Erromango, *kastom* found a way, and today the island is seeing something of a renaissance represented by ongoing work by Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta fieldworkers and the Erromango Cultural Association (Christidis et al. 2009; Naupa, ed. 2011). Here too the pattern is not a 'pure' return to traditional life, but a synthesis of Christian and Melanesian beliefs and practices. This should not be seen as an unresolved dialectic, but a successful negotiation of colonialism. Melanesian people managed to integrate the formidable god of the missionaries into their universe without surrendering *kastom's* core substance. The archaeological argument is that material things made this compromise possible.

## Material Patterns in the New Hebrides Missions

Archaeological research on mission encounters on Tanna and Erromango revealed a number of patterns relating to everyday life and the material aspects of religious conversion. Missionaries moved into densely settled island landscapes that contained gardens, villages, and ceremonial structures. Physical settlement was linked to a symbolically rich world of places, stories, and spirits. These landscapes continued to evolve through the colonial era and into the present. Missionary sites and stories became a part of the pantheon of *kastom* space. Where mission stations were established, mission houses were an important locus of interaction. Mission houses reflect the performance of civilised Christianity by the mission family, as well as the necessity of adapting to the local context. They also show fleeting evidence for exchanges of labour, materials, and ideas between Melanesians and missionaries. The things exchanged were objects of fascination, speculation, desire, and derision on both sides. These phenomena provide a critical lens for understanding the material underpinnings of the missionary project, and the Melanesian incorporation of Christianity into *kastom*.

### Landscapes of Conversion

Mission sites on Tanna and Erromango were embedded in Melanesian landscapes. Early explorers' accounts indicate that the islands were densely populated. For example, Cook records seeing over 1,000 people in a single gathering at Port Resolution in 1774 (Beaglehole, ed. 1969: 482–484). Over time, however, the population of the islands decreased dramatically because of introduced diseases. Particularly virulent outbreaks of measles, influenza, and cholera were noted in missionary accounts (e.g. Gordon, ed. 1863: 175; Turner 1861: 29–31). In some cases, as with the measles outbreak of 1860 on Tanna, there were not enough healthy people to bury the dead. Because missionaries had already identified themselves as having a special relationship to a particularly powerful spirit that caused illness, they were soon chased from the island (Adams 1984: 116–133). As populations continued declining in the closing decades of the 1800s, there was decreasing local resistance to missionary presence, as people aggregated in coastal settlements. Demography does appear to have played a role in the higher rates of conversion by the end of the 1800s. Further archaeological research, however, would be needed to refine our knowledge about the nature of demographic decline during the colonial era (Spriggs 1997: 235, 253–254, 2007).

Missionaries did not choose directly where to settle, but were limited to places that local chiefs allocated for them. Often, they were placed in perilous positions by being located on the boundaries between land divisions, as was the case for James Gordon at Potnuma, or on contested ground, as happened with John G. Paton at Port Resolution. This led to conflict, and in some cases the failure of mission settlements. Missionaries settled in a place that was populated

not just by Melanesian people, but a host of spirits, ancestors, and other supernatural beings. Often these were materialised in trees, stones, and springs (e.g. Bonnemaïson 1994: 176–178). In dismissing local ‘superstitions’, missionaries misunderstood the ways physical hazards, such as tropical disease, might be linked to place-based spiritual dangers. In many cases, mission stations were located on *tabu* ground. This was probably the case for the Watts at Kwamera, whose house was located on a burial ground that may have been inhabited by dangerous *ierehma* (spirits; Flexner and Willie 2015). Among Melanesian people, illness or death within the missionary family would have been interpreted in spiritual terms, a sign of the power of local spirits over the foreign god.

At the same time, missionaries worked to organise social space into a pattern that worked with their own cosmology. Land was cleared to make room for mission houses, church buildings, and other infrastructure. Cutting trees likely infringed on local usufruct rights, something about which the missionaries were probably unaware, but which would have furthered tensions with local people (Adams 1984: 60). In missionary terms, they were constructing an ‘ordered’ landscape in contrast to the ‘disordered’ space of the surrounding indigenous landscape. At Dillon’s Bay, the missionary family had local converts build a massive complex of walls to demarcate this division. Local forms of spatial organisation, as with the networks of gardens, hamlets, and *imwarim* on Tanna, or the villages and *Siman lo* of Erromango, were generally dismissed as a native chaos if they were recognised at all (Robertson 1902: 375–376; Turner 1861: 84–85).

Over time, missionaries could access materials more effectively. Mission houses grew in size and elaboration (Table 6.1). More and more buildings were added to the mission infrastructure. Church services moved from simple outdoor ceremonies, to buildings of local materials, to imported kits using prefabricated materials from throughout the British Empire (Flexner et al. 2015a; Robertson 1902: 321–326). This increasing complexity of mission settlements correlates with increasing numbers of converts. Eventually the missionaries sought to shape local settlement patterns, building ‘model villages’ for Melanesian Christians. This is not a simple causal relationship of ‘more stuff, more conversion’, but a reflection of the feedback loops produced by the increasing influence of the Presbyterian Church on local affairs, and its increasing affluence because of connections to global trade networks. Yet the landscapes of Tanna and Erromango retained their Melanesian character. Archaeological evidence from Kwaraka and Anuikaraka shows continuity in the construction of stone structures in a village inhabited over at least four centuries. The networks of *imwarim*, hamlets, and gardens on Tanna, and the villages with their *Siman lo* on Erromango, remain today, often in the same villages that once aggregated around the mission.

Table 6.1 Increase in area from early (G. Gordon, J. Gordon, Imua) to later (Robertson, Watt) mission houses.

Site Name	Location	Date Range	Estimated House Size (m)*	Estimated House Size (ft)*
George Gordon House	Dillon’s Bay, Erromango	1856–1861	8 x 5**	25 x 15**
Imua Mission	Imua, Tanna	1858–1862	6 x 4**	19 x 13**
James Gordon House	Potnuma, Erromango	1868–1872	10 x 5	32 x 16
Robertson House	Dillon’s Bay, Erromango	1872–1900s	21.5 x 7	69 x 22
Watt House	Kwamera, Tanna	1869–1900s	18 x 8	58 x 25

\* Rounded to the nearest foot or metre

\*\* House size estimated only, further excavations needed

## Domestic Dilemmas

Mission houses were one of the primary loci of interaction between missionaries and Melanesians. Household archaeology was identified early on as a fieldwork priority for this reason (Flexner 2013: 16–20). These houses had to be multipurpose spaces. They were to provide a safe and ‘civilised’ space for the mission family. Whitewashed lime mortar, window glass, and European furniture and domestic goods were necessary markers of difference when compared with native thatched houses and material culture. At the same time, the mission house was to serve as an exemplar to which potential converts were to aspire (if not actually to achieve). Despite concerns about theft or even violence, missionaries encouraged local people to explore parts of the house, and set things out specifically to incite their interest (Patterson 1864: 257; Robertson 1902: 193; Watt 1896: 81–82).

Part of the intended transformation of local domestic life by the missionaries had to do with the gendering of labour in Melanesian and Christian societies. Presbyterian missionaries in the southern New Hebrides were shocked by the labour conditions of native women not because of the amount of work they did, but because that work was seen as gendered inappropriately (Jolly 1992). The manual labour of gardening was seen as especially unfit for wives and mothers. It wasn’t so much a matter of releasing native women from hours of hard work (though there is some evidence that missionary presence did reduce this; see Spriggs 1993), but that the drudgery had to be moved inside the home, which was the domain of properly feminine endeavours. Missionary women would have modelled this behaviour for their potential converts (Lindstrom 2013; Watt 1896).

Ironically, we know more archaeologically about the domestic assemblages of earlier mission houses than the larger, more elaborate stations. The early mission houses on Tanna and Erromango were abandoned suddenly when missionaries were killed or chased away. As a result, many of the domestic goods remain within and immediately around the house structure. At Imua, it appears that almost the entire household assemblage was left behind, including an almost complete set of transfer-printed tablewares. James Gordon House on Erromango similarly has a rich domestic assemblage. The ruins of post-1870s mission houses, in contrast, tend to be located within contemporary villages, and have thus been disturbed by ongoing 20th-century activities. In addition, the later houses were less likely to be abandoned suddenly. Missionaries who retired after a long career in the field likely took much of their household assemblage with them, aside from a few gifts left to friends on the island. With the later missions, a lack of consumer things in the archaeological record reflects the formation processes associated with planned departure, rather than sudden abandonment of the mission house, combined with ongoing inhabitation of the surrounding Melanesian village.

There is some scope for interpreting variability across these domestic assemblages. One common thread reflected in the faunal remains is missionary reliance on local marine resources, especially shellfish, as a source of protein. Missionaries would also have been heavily reliant on local vegetable produce as a supplement to imported flour and rice, if not a staple (Robertson 1902: 376–380; Watt 1896: 84). Another is the use of locally produced lime mortar as an architectural material. Whitewashed lime mortar was an important marker of civilised housing in contrast to local traditions (see also Mills 2009). Both of these indicate that local resources and labour were an integral part of mission life. Documentary evidence further indicates reliance on local girls as domestic servants (Robertson 1902: 189–193; Watt 1896: 80–81). Artefacts such as tobacco pipes and slate pencils, fairly ubiquitous on these sites (Table 6.2), reflect exchanges with local people. Pencils reflect exchanges of ideas and the technology of literacy, which was critical in Presbyterian conceptions of proper Christianity. In Protestant ideology, converts had to be able to read the Bible. Pipes were more of a trade good. There are many other materials, such as trade cloth, that do not preserve archaeologically but were nonetheless important to the process of material exchange.

Table 6.2 'Small finds', including indigenous and European trade items.

Object Name	G. Gordon House	Imua Mission	J. Gordon House	Kwaraka	New Kwaraka	Robertson Mission	Watt Mission	Grand Total
Abrader	2					2	1	5
Adze					2			2
Bottle Stopper			1					1
Ochre							1	1
Pendant							1	1
Pipebowl	1			1	1	2		5
Pipestem	1			2			2	5
Red Crystal							5	5
Slate Pencil	4	3	16				3	26
Grand Total	8	3	17	3	3	4	13	51

Domestic assemblages may reflect a certain degree of consumer choice among missionary families. Transfer prints at the early mission houses show distinctive motifs. George Gordon House yielded more 'Oriental' wares featuring pagodas and bamboo, James Gordon House yielded the 'Classical' Minerva pattern, while Imua yielded a remarkable assemblage of the 'Romantic-Pastoral' Arcadia pattern. The nature of 'choice' here must be understood with the caveat that domestic goods may have been donated to the mission cause. However, the extent to which the ceramic assemblages are internally consistent within each site, rather than being standardised across the sites, likely indicates that the missionaries could to some extent decide what kinds of household items to take with them. With the different kinds of transfer prints, missionaries may have had particular moralising ends in mind, as with the associations of Minerva with wisdom, or Arcadia with the pastoral paradise.

There is some evidence that mission houses took on increasingly localised material references. European ceramics were used to serve yams, island cabbage, fish, and shellfish gathered from reefs and beaches. Native 'curiosities' adorned walls and shelves around the house, with the red-slipped Ambae pottery at Potnuma providing a key archaeological example. Converts as well as missionaries likely mixed Western clothing with local shell necklaces, as suggested by the *Nerita* shell pendant from Imua. Domestic space in the New Hebrides was permeable. Missionaries simultaneously asserted their otherness in relation to Melanesian people through their houses, and filled the house with reminders that they were indeed far from their homeland (see also Rodman 2001).

### Matter and Spirit

As missionaries exchanged objects with Tannese and Erromangan people, they were creating relationships that were more than simply economic (Adams 1984: 59). Missionaries were to greater and lesser degrees aware of this, especially considering the extent to which material and spiritual change were seen as linked. In Presbyterian as much as Melanesian cosmology, it would have been recognised that matter/spirit was a false dichotomy. Persons (or 'souls') lived at the confluence of the two elements. There was some extent to which personhood was 'dividual', attached to the things that people used, kept, and exchanged (Strathern 1990), on both sides of missionary encounters in the New Hebrides. Dividuality could extend into the spiritual realm as well. The spiritual world could to some extent be controlled by ritual action, though there was variability in belief about the extent to which spirits engaged in human affairs of their own accord (Douglas 1989).

On Tanna, '[f]lows of words, labour, goods, and substances built persons and personal character for the Watts and for the Tannese alike' (Lindstrom 2013: 259). Chiefship on Tanna involved to some degree the 'Heroic I' (Lindstrom 2011), in which achievements could be passed down across generations among people with shared names and titles. Thus personhood was also dividual historically. The Tannese also appear to have seen proper ritual knowledge and action by specialists as determining outcomes in relationships with the supernatural world, with definite ramifications for the human world (Douglas 1989: 12–13, 39). Magic stones made the yams grow. Others in the possession of *narak* sorcerers caused illness and death. Contact with *ierehma* (spirits) could be dangerous, even fatal (Bonnemaison 1994: 172–182; Humphreys 1926: 70–73). A similar situation existed on Erromango. *Natemas* spirits had to be propitiated with offerings. Magical specialists called *neteme sokowar* controlled the forces of the natural world, especially wind and rain. *Natemas evai* (magic stones) also caused illness and death (Humphreys 1926: 167–177; Robertson 1902: 389, 400–401).

Spiritual and social relationships were mediated through feasts, exchanges, and rituals. As missionaries entered the scene, they became entangled in the networks produced by these systems. At times, missionaries misunderstood the nature of what people were offering. Turner and Nisbet declined a propitiatory gift of a pig, shocked that they had been identified with sorcery (Adams 1984: 68; Douglas 1989: 15). This was despite the fact that they had insisted their god was the source of the new illnesses on Tanna. In declining the gift, Turner and Nisbet broke from the expected pattern, showing they had no interest in being propitiated. Tannese people had no option but to chase them away after that. Where missionary-sorcerers were killed or fled suddenly, their things were left behind. There may have been some worry that the *natemas* or *ierehma* of departed missionaries had a potentially dangerous presence in their objects. At Dillon's Bay, the mission house was burned some time after the Gordons were killed. At Imua, the mission house appears to have been left to decay naturally, and documentary evidence shows that missionary things placed in the boathouse downhill from the site were likewise avoided (Patterson 1864: 497–498).

For many Tannese and Erromangan people, the consumer items left behind by the missionaries may also simply have been uninteresting. Ceramic dishes were heavy, breakable, unwieldy, and not particularly functional for cooking or serving local cuisine. If bamboo or shell knives were more common than volcanic glass, as appears to have been the case, then bottle glass would not provide a useful analogue. Light and resilient bottles of bamboo would have been more desirable as water containers than fragile and heavy glass. Metal tools, cloth, and tobacco smoking paraphernalia were desirable, and were traded with the missionaries. Archaeologically, these things appear in remarkably low density in the surrounding settlements, at least on south Tanna. While further research is needed, the initial suggestion is that foreign objects were exchanged as much within indigenous networks as between missionaries and Melanesians, especially considering the increasing availability of trade goods through the sandalwood and labour trades. For some people, trading directly with a missionary may have been seen as a risky bargain, because of the possibility of wider spiritual ramifications from interacting with the foreign sorcerers.

New forms of exchange, such as the capitalist pattern of goods for labour, would have been interpreted in *kastom* as a mechanism for producing relationships rather than a simple payment where one category was traded for an equivalent amount from another. Missionaries saw any signs of apparent shifts towards a capitalist mindset in positive terms. Speaking of native converts' labour patterns, Robertson (1902: 388) enthusiastically declares: 'Remembering what thieves and beggars they [Erromangans] were when they were heathens, we are often amazed as well as encouraged and delighted at the wonderful change that has come over them in this, one of the highest and best tests of a good man.' The equation of being a good wage labourer with

being a good man is telling when it comes to the missionary's perspective, but what of local perceptions of these exchanges? The cash economy did not replace feasts such as the *nisekar*. The last traditional *neusem* was recorded in 1920, and the practice was revived in the 1990s (Naupa, ed. 2011: 24–26). Initial interactions with missionaries, interpreted as 'theft', were probably structured more by expectations of material exchanges as a prelude to forming social relationships. As Melanesians adapted and learned more about the foreigners, cash exchanges were possibly seen as a different form of ritual to pacify the missionaries and further draw them into local networks.

Where missionaries acquired local things, they interpreted them as 'curios' from the exotic Melanesians. Melanesians had their own reasons for engaging in this kind of trade (Flexner 2016b; see also Clarke and Torrence 2011; Torrence and Clarke 2013). Objects such as arrows, clubs (assuming they didn't hold any special value for the owner), combs, and grass skirts may have offered a means of acquiring valued things or social prestige with a minimum of spiritual danger. More sacred objects, such as *navela* (stone money) or magic stones may have been gifted as a means of diffusing their power. As populations collapsed, there may not have been an appropriate heir for some very powerful objects. But having the object present without an owner could have been socially and spiritually dangerous. These objects may also have offered a means of securing particularly close ties with powerful foreigners. Returning again to the idea that objects inhabited nodes in extensive social networks along with the people to whom they were connected, the context of a global exchange would have amplified connections between Melanesians and Europeans.

In a telling episode, Robertson (1902: 359–360) was gifted a number of sacred objects by a *Fan lo* (chief) from Port Narvin:

When I visited [Noroseki] then in his large *siman-lo*, I saw that there was to be quite a ceremony. In the presence of two hundred of his people, the old chief laid down on the ground before me, one by one, all his idols or sacred stones, including the one he treasured most – a beautiful *navilah* called Nanepintaru, which is a woman's name [...] One of these stones had a very small *numpelat* or 'skirt' tied to it; another, again, had a charm in the shape of a pierced shell. [...] E]very now and again, while walking up and down between his relics, telling me the names and histories of one after another of them, he would stop, and, turning to those around us, plead with them to "take the word" which was then doing so much for so many on Erromango.

Robertson of course interpreted this ritual in terms of sincere conversion, but there is a more nuanced interpretation that could be made of the event. Rather than simply giving up his idols, perhaps in offering them to the missionary, Noroseki was using these objects to further incorporate Robertson, and the god he represented, into the Erromangan universe. Robertson couldn't actually become a member of the *Fan lo* class, that is, he couldn't 'become Erromangan', but he could become incorporated into Erromango to the extent that the foreign god would be legible and thus controllable for Erromangan people.

Melanesians would have understood the relationship between material and spiritual worlds, though not in the capitalist terms embraced by the missionaries (see Weber 2002[1905]). Material exchanges expanded the networks of social relationships that could be called upon to organise connections with the spiritual world, which in turn had impacts on the physical world. The god of the missionaries showed itself to be dangerous. One way of neutralising this danger was to entrap the newcomers who had the greatest influence over this entity within a web of local obligations and social connections. Objects offered a means of organising society such that foreign things, people, and spirits could be subsumed within the framework of *kastom*. *Kastom* was transformed through these interactions, but it remained the overarching social ecology organising everyday life through the medium of Melanesian people's actions.

## Future Research Potential

While the findings of this project are significant, the results should be seen as a preliminary step. For Vanuatu, and to some extent Island Melanesia more broadly, historical archaeology is still in something of an ‘exploratory’ phase (Flexner et al. 2016b). Within the context of mission encounters and colonial archaeology, any of the sites discussed in this book would benefit from further investigation. Other aspects of southern Vanuatu’s colonial archaeology merit future research, particularly the environmental and social impacts of the sandalwood and labour trades. The labour trade would be particularly interesting for reconnecting Melanesia with Australian South Sea Islander communities. Archaeologists are beginning to explore evidence for Melanesians in Queensland (Barker and Lamb 2011; Hayes 2002). There is an opportunity to follow Melanesians from their starting points in the islands, to Queensland, Fiji, or New Caledonia, and ‘home’ again in this kind of research.

On Tanna and Erromango, there is also great potential for research examining the overall histories of settlement, interaction, and landscape change from initial Lapita settlement through the colonial era (see Shutler et al. 2002; Spriggs 1986). Erromango is better known than Tanna in archaeological perspective (see Chapter 2, Chapter 3). Even on Erromango, archaeological research is primarily focused on a few coastal areas, with the interior of the island basically unknown. On Tanna, even less fieldwork has been done. In both cases, fundamental archaeological surveys are needed, along with detailed recording and excavation of a broader sample of sites. Among other things, modelling long-term settlement patterns on Tanna and Erromango would provide a better understanding of the demographic changes that took place in the colonial era (Spriggs 1997: 235, 253–254, 2007).

Returning to mission archaeology, there are two streams of research that might be informative. One would be to expand the study of Presbyterian mission sites north into Vanuatu’s central and northern islands. This would serve to continue to track material changes through time, especially in the later part of mission history from the 1890s through World War II. It would also allow for some comparative study of how missionary encounters were experienced in areas with different languages and *kastom* on other islands. The other research field that could be opened is the study of Vanuatu’s other Christian sects. Anglican and Catholic missions were both active in the 19th century. The Anglicans worked closely with the Presbyterians, but it would be worth studying the ways a more centralised model of mission work, in which Melanesians were taken to the mission schools in New Zealand and later Norfolk Island (Hilliard 1978; Ross 1983), played out when converts returned home. Catholic missions followed yet another model, based also on a difference in beliefs, and examination of their materialisation of the work of conversion could offer a fascinating contrast with the Protestant missions. Some of the ‘marginal’ churches, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, settled their first missionaries nearly 100 years ago, and these sites are worth documenting archaeologically.

There is immense potential for historical archaeology to expand throughout Vanuatu. On Tanna and Erromango, there is also a significant opportunity for fieldwork to further expand our knowledge about cultural transformations well before the missionaries arrived. While this project has contributed in a small way to broadening our understanding of colonial encounters in Island Melanesia, and an even smaller way to expanding our knowledge of pre-contact Tanna and Erromango, there is clearly much more work to be done. To add a note of urgency, Vanuatu’s colonial architectural heritage remains imperilled because of natural disasters, ongoing neglect, and capitalist economic development (Flexner et al. 2016a; Rodman 2001). Archaeological recording of standing buildings from the 19th and early 20th century should be a continuing priority for research in partnership with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

## Archaeology of Conversion Revisited

Hayden (2003: 392–393) argues for an ‘ecological’ perspective on Christian conversion, in which the material and social opportunities afforded to converts shaped the religion’s ability to take hold and spread, especially in the context of the terminal Roman Empire. There is certainly some degree of truth to this model, in which religious change is driven by factors that favour more stable patterns of subsistence, material wealth, and social cohesion. Social instability seems to offer some explanation for religious transformation as well, often with a material basis. In some cases, the ability of certain Islamist groups to expand and sometimes dominate local politics has been connected to their ability to efficiently control access to food, water, and other materials in comparison with government or other authorities, though often using violent methods to achieve this end (e.g. Eng and Martinez 2014).

However, in colonial settings that had already coherent systems for maintaining social, ecological, and supernatural wellbeing, the question remains as to why people would transform their practices or adopt new beliefs. The case study of missions on Tanna and Erromango may be instructive in this regard. Initially, attempts at settling missionaries on these islands were simply rebuffed by local people. Over time, as populations declined, in some cases whole villages were wiped out, and local subsistence as well as social systems began to break down. Melanesian magicians simply could not protect their people from foreign illnesses. Chiefs died, and titles could not be passed on. Simultaneously, the material wealth of the missionaries appeared to increase, surely a reflection of their access to an effective magical mode of production (Appadurai 1986: 52). Melanesians began congregating in the coastal mission settlements. The missionaries overreached, however, in their attempts to purify the islands of heathenism. The result was a counter-reaction, in which people fled back to *kastom* in order to escape the dissolution of their society. Having never disappeared, *kastom* came back to the forefront. It was not, however, a ‘pure’ return to the original order, but a compromise order that incorporated aspects of the new colonial systems into the overarching Melanesian one.

It is easy with hindsight to interpret missionary endeavours in the 1800s in terms of cultural ignorance. We might wonder at the missionaries recklessly casting themselves as dangerous sorcerers, or building mission houses on contested or spiritually dangerous ground. However, missionaries did not have the benefit of 120-plus years of ethnographic and ethnohistoric knowledge available to the contemporary researcher. How could anything but cultural misunderstanding result from such encounters? In many cases, the missionaries themselves were the authors of some of the first ethnographic works on the islands where they settled (e.g. Gray 1892; Inglis 1854; Watt 1895). It is also true that in contemporary terms, certain events such as the shelling of Tanna by the HMS *Curaçoa* at the insistence of John G. Paton could be seen as criminal. The goal here, however, is not to judge historical actors for our edification as holders of superior knowledge. Rather, we need to understand such historical events and data in the terms in which they were experienced, and to use that knowledge to understand patterns apparent in the present.

In writing a materialist historical archaeology of missions, I am not aiming to take anything away from the faith of the missionaries. We have to assume that their beliefs were sincere and their convictions drove them to the furthest ends of the Earth. At the same time, an archaeological perspective on these encounters reveals the material underpinnings of the conversion process. Without access to global trading and voyaging networks, mass-produced consumer goods, and the wealth produced by the industrial revolution, mission work could not have taken the form outlined in the preceding chapters. Presbyterian missionaries in the New Hebrides could not have survived or won converts using ‘faith alone’. The things they brought with them had to be interesting enough to local people, and their presence seen by local chiefs especially as

beneficial enough for them to be tolerated. Without the material things exchanged in mission encounters, there would be no Christianity in the New Hebrides. Often, this did not happen, and missionaries were chased away or killed. In many cases, these events tell us as much about social relationships among islanders as they do about relationships between islanders and missionaries (see also Adams 1984).

The story of religious change continues in Island Melanesia (e.g. Montgomery 2004; Tomlinson and McDougall, eds 2012). While foreign Presbyterian missionaries largely departed after the Second World War, missionaries from other sects, notably the Seventh Day Adventists and Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), as well as smaller evangelical churches, continue to be active in the region. The material inequalities created by European colonialism and global capitalism are expressed in patterns of mission work in the present. This is why Australian and American Evangelical missionaries remain active in Vanuatu, even though the country was 86 per cent Christian as of the most recent census (compare with 76 per cent Christian in the US and a mere 61 per cent in Australia; see Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012; US Census Bureau 2012; Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009). It is still easier (read, economically more efficient and socially more feasible) for global missionary work to take place where the missionaries have much greater access to material wealth than their would-be converts. This is not to say that the spiritual dimension is irrelevant to missionary work, but that the material basis for processes of religious change shapes the patterns in which such work takes place.

## Changing and Staying the Same

As noted above, religious change remains an ongoing process. If anything, the influence of the major world religions on global events is increasing despite secularist expectations to the contrary (Fowles 2013: 2–4). Archaeologists have recently renewed interests in the study of long-term religious change (e.g. Fowles 2013; Hayden 2003; Shaw 2013b). The spread of the ‘world religions’ of Christianity, Islam (e.g. Carvajal 2013; Insoll 1999, 2003), and Buddhism (e.g. Shaw 2013a) may be of particular relevance as they continue to shape the worldviews of billions of people. Archaeological studies of the spread of Christianity cover its expansion in Europe during the ‘middle ages’ (e.g. Älkäs and Salmi 2013; Andrén 2013; Jonuks and Kurisoo 2009; Lund 2013; Sawicki et al. 2015), as well as continuing transformations in the postmedieval period (e.g. Atzback 2015; Graves 2009; Petts 2011). An even richer archaeological literature of Christian expansion exists in the colonial context (e.g. Crossland 2006; Hiscock 2013; Lightfoot 2005; Lydon 2009; Lydon and Ash 2010; Middleton 2003, 2007, 2008; Morrison et al. 2015; Panich and Schneider, eds 2014; Smith 2014; Smith et al. 2012; Wingfield 2013).

In each case, the question of how and why people change some aspect of their relationship to the supernatural world inevitably leads to a broader discussion of the connections between religious belief, environment, the material, and the social. Ultimately, any such model will be contingent upon the specific society being analysed. As Fowles (2013) points out, there is no analysis of religious change that can completely separate ‘religion’ as a category from the wider ecology of connections that links the world of spirits, ancestors, and deities to the world of everyday life, material things, and interpersonal relationships. Different societies will have different ways of explaining their understanding of such networks. In Pueblo society, the shorthand is ‘doings’. In Melanesia, I would suggest ‘*kastom*’ suffices to cover this web of relationships that connects ecosystems, human activities, objects, and spirits, of which the Christian God is one. What archaeology offers is a methodology for using material evidence to understand how and why these networks change through time.

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